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Senate-Laos Bjt 500

By CARL P. LEUBSDORF

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON AP - The Pentagon has advised the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after a 93-month correspondence it is unable to supply information about the number of U.S. military personnel, air strikes, and casualties in Laos.

It suggested the panel try the State Department.

Sen. J.W. Fulbright, D-Ark., the committee chairman, called this suggestion "eloquent testimony to the efficiency of the Department of Defense" - or else the Pentagon's assumption of "the arrogant position it cannot be held accountable to anyone."

Fulbright put the exchange of letters in the Congressional Record. The exchange began last Jan. 27 when Fulbright asked Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird for data on Laos and Cambodia similar to what the committee has been receiving on Vietnam.

On April 14, G. Warren Nutter, assistant secretary for international security affairs, replied that the Pentagon could not supply the material because it would include "highly sensitive information on military combat operations."

Fulbright then asked for material on the items outside of the "highly sensitive" category. Two weeks later Nutter replied this would be impossible due to the sensitive nature of some information and the fact that the congressional ban on U.S. military advisers in Laos and Cambodia "effectively precludes reliable reporting to the Department of Defense of information of that nature."

About the same time two committee staff aides, James Lowenstein and Richard Moose, visited Laos, obtained much of the information sought in the Jan. 27 letter and released it in a report declassified by the State Department, Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency.

On Aug. 9 Fulbright again wrote Nutter, noting that "the information I have requested is available because it has been provided to members of the committee staff" and requesting again it be supplied on a monthly basis.

More than two months later, on Oct. 16, Fulbright wrote Laird, saying he had received no reply.

On Thursday, Fulbright received a letter dated Nov. 8 and signed by J. Fred Buzhardt, the Pentagon's general counsel. It restated the previous reasons for not supplying the material, noted that the Lowenstein-Moose report said "The war in Laos is run in most respects by the Embassy in Vientiane" and said the request was therefore being forwarded to the State Department.

"It apparently has taken Mr. Buzhardt three months to reach the conclusion that the Department of Defense does not have the information necessary to provide 'a large part of the data requested'," Fulbright said.

He added:

"A Defense Department which states it does not have this information is either admitting its inefficiency or taking the arrogant position it cannot be held accountable to anyone."

"If it does not consider itself accountable to the Congress which provides its funds, it is, in a real and disturbing sense, uncontrollable."

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